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Study may help impoverished Black Belt

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They have been some of the most neglected areas of the United States for more than a century. High school graduation rates are among the lowest in the country, poverty and unemployment rates among the highest.

Finally, there is a chance that Alabama's Black Belt counties might pull out of the country's cellar. But it is only a chance.

"I don't know if anything can save it," said George Rable, a history professor at the University of Alabama.

U.S. Sen. Zell Miller, D-Ga., has proposed a study to create a commission to address Black Belt counties across the South. It and recent initiatives by Gov. Don Siegelman are rare moves to help Alabama's poorest counties.

They might all be too late, some say.

"The Black Belt just seems impervious to any remedy," said Samuel Webb, a history professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Miller's study would look at starting a commission like the Appalachian Regional Commission, which has helped 13 states build new highways, create new jobs and reduce poverty since 1965. Miller is asking for \$250,000 in next year's federal budget.

The proposed commission would cover counties in all 11 states of the old Confederacy: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. As the plan stands now, 30 Alabama counties would fall under the commission, including Jefferson and Montgomery.

Alabama's traditional Black Belt is the band of counties that sweeps across the southern part of the state. Other counties have been placed on the list because they have a black population of at least 25 percent, a spokesman for Miller said.

The traditional Alabama Black Belt counties — Dallas, Greene, Sumter, Hale, Marengo, Clarke, Wilcox, Perry, Autauga, Lowndes, Montgomery, Macon, Bullock, Barbour and Russell — are a lasting legacy of racism in the state, Gable said. They were among the wealthiest counties in the country before the Civil War, the locations of large cotton-growing plantations.

The phrase "Black Belt" comes from the ground's rich soil, but it has come to sound more like "black hole" to those who know the area, Webb said.

"The Black Belt is one of the worst problems of the United States," he said.

The Civil War made much of the Black Belt's money worthless. The cotton market collapsed in the 1890s. Justice and sharecropping systems put blacks as much at the mercy of white landowners as they had been as slaves.

Those and countless other causes led to the Black Belt's problems, Rable and Webb said.

No one has worked to change the problems because they have been largely invisible, Rable said. On interstate highways, people can drive right through the area without seeing what it is, he said. The counties aren't heavily populated, so they can't influence much with their votes. And the best and the brightest just move away, Webb said.

"The only people who get away from the poverty leave," he said.

Siegelman has begun steering more grant money toward the Black Belt, and he has created a special task force to deal with the worst counties, said Carrie Kurlander, a spokeswoman for the governor.

Still, the state is just beginning an effort after decades of overlooking the counties.

"In a state like Alabama with so many problems, it's hard for anything that doesn't rise to the level of crisis to get much attention," said Larry Childers, a spokesman for Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs.

The Black Belt may be beyond crisis, Webb said. It's also beyond the racism, he said. It may have started there, but the Black Belt has become a place where there is no product to sell and no place to work for anyone, he said.

"People are poor down there, and it just festers," Webb said. "It gets worse."

At least someone is trying now, Rable said. They'll be trying without much of a map, he said.

"I don't know if there is any precedent for solving these problems," he said.